

---

## Ginés Garrido, Mélnikov en París, 1925

Richard Anderson

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/8066>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.8066

ISSN: 1777-5388

**Publisher**

Éditions de l'EHESS

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 July 2014

Number of pages: 406-410

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2441-6

ISSN: 1252-6576

**Electronic reference**

Richard Anderson, « Ginés Garrido, Mélnikov en París, 1925 », *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 55/3-4 | 2014, Online since 13 April 2015, Connection on 24 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/8066> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.8066>

---

This text was automatically generated on 24 September 2020.

© École des hautes études en sciences sociales

---

# Ginés Garrido, Mélnikov en París, 1925

Richard Anderson

---

## REFERENCES

Ginés GARRIDO, *Mélnikov en París, 1925*, Barcelone : Fundación caja de arquitectos (Coll. Arquia/thesis, 33), 2011, 262 p.

- 1 Reporting on the Soviet Pavilion at the International Exposition of Decorative Arts of 1925 for the Moscow weekly magazine *Ogonek*, Ilia Ehrenburg registered the range of opinions about Konstantin Melnikov's ephemeral structure circulating in Paris. "Mr. Nouveau-riche" thought it "a glass cage for the red beast." The architect Le Corbusier, the painter Fernand Léger and the poet Pierre Mac Orlan allegedly called it "the only pavilion at the exposition worth seeing."<sup>1</sup> The mixed reception of this first international manifestation of the new architecture that had been cultivated in Moscow's schools and studios in the aftermath of the October Revolution was a symptom of the uncertain relationship among the young USSR and the other countries participating in the exposition. France's belated invitation to the USSR to participate was likewise a product of uncertainty about the Soviet Union's place in the world. Thanks largely to the efforts of Edouard Herriot and Anatole de Monzie, France established diplomatic relations with the USSR in late October 1924. On 1 November, the Soviet Union was invited to participate in the International Exposition, which was scheduled to run from May to October 1925. In *Mélnikov en París, 1925*, Ginés Garrido describes the rapid and complex succession of events that produced one of the twentieth century's most arresting and enigmatic buildings.
- 2 Garrido takes the trajectory of Melnikov and his project for the Soviet Pavilion from Moscow in late 1924, to Paris in 1925, and back to Moscow in 1926 as his organizing principle, though the ambitions of his book are far broader than this itinerary might suggest. Melnikov's pavilion is important to Garrido because "within it is condensed

not only the October Revolution but also the plastic research that had been undertaken in the ten previous years in Russia and Western Europe.” This thesis discloses both the stakes of understanding Melnikov’s work and the approach Garrido adopts. His analysis situates the building equally well within the material and economic exigencies of design and construction and in relation to the development of avant-garde artistic and architectural experiments since the advent of Cubism. While Melnikov may have been an individualist, a “solo architect” in the words of Melnikov’s first biographer S. Frederick Starr, Garrido shows that he was also a perceptive observer and interpreter of the work of his contemporaries.

- 3 Preparations for the Soviet Pavilion unfolded in a rapid chain of events. In the weeks following the receipt of the invitation to participate, Anatolii Lunacharskii charged VOKS, the Society for Relations with Foreign Countries, and GAKhN, the State Academy of Artistic Sciences, with responsibility for orchestrating both the design and construction of a pavilion in Paris and assembling the objects to be displayed. The president of GAKhN, Petr Kogan, oversaw the general organization of the Soviet contribution to the fair and created an executive committee chaired by the painter David Shterenberg to coordinate the composition of the Soviet section. By 18 November, the committee had created a list of architects to be invited to a closed competition for the design of the Soviet Pavilion: Vladimir Shchuko, Ivan Fomin, the Vesnin brothers, Nikolai Ladovskii, Nikolai Dokuchaev, Vladimir Krinskii, Moisei Ginzburg, Ivan Golosov, and Konstantin Melnikov. Among this list of competitors, Shchuko and Fomin were the only architects who remained loyal to classical tradition; the others, Melnikov included, represented the vanguard of architectural experiment in the Soviet Union. The scales were thus tipped in favour of an innovative architectural project for the Soviet pavilion from the very start.
- 4 The committee awarded Melnikov the commission on 28 December and asked him to submit a final version of the project to Lunacharskii in the following weeks. The jury was certainly impressed with Melnikov’s project, but there is no doubt that the Makhorka pavilion that he designed for the First All-Union Agricultural Exhibition of 1923 and his design Sukharevskii Market of 1924 contributed to his success in the competition. The committee approved a reworked version of Melnikov’s project on 6 January 1925, which was further revised based on feedback supplied by a commission of architects and then ratified on 11 January. The following week, Melnikov departed for Paris to oversee the construction of the pavilion.
- 5 Garrido offers an in-depth analysis of the development of Melnikov’s project for the pavilion during its short and intense period of gestation. Through a close analysis of the surviving sketches of Melnikov’s project, Garrido reconstructs Melnikov’s design process and illuminates the ways Melnikov engaged with the artistic and architectural experiments of the early 1920s. In his account of the genesis of the project, Garrido is in dialogue both with Melnikov himself, who described his work on the project in 1967, and S. Frederick Starr, who discussed Melnikov’s pavilion at length in his biography of 1978 and in a small book devoted exclusively to the pavilion published in Italian in 1979, which was reissued and expanded with Jean-Louis Cohen in a French edition in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Casting a wide net, Garrido reveals formal and programmatic links between Melnikov’s design and the agit-prop projects of Gustav Klucis, Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, the painting and sculpture of Aleksandr Rodchenko, Liubov’ Popova’s stage designs, El Lissitzky’s experimental projects and student work

from VKhUTEMAS, the Higher State Artistic and Technical Studios. Garrido also finds precedents for Melnikov's project in his earlier work, in particular his Makhorka Pavilion and his project for the headquarters of *Leningradskaja Pravda* in Moscow of 1924. His analysis of the sources of Melnikov's design may not give sufficient weight to the project for a covered market by the young architect Ivan Volodko of 1923, the roof of which is composed of alternating inclined planes, prefiguring the structure Melnikov devised to cover the primary stairway of the pavilion. Likewise, the importance of Melnikov's design for a sarcophagus for Lenin of early 1924, which took the form of a rectangular prism sliced on the diagonal, for his project for the pavilion could have been clarified. Garrido does note this relationship, but only in a chapter on the formal and artistic sources of the pavilion's design that is separated from his insightful analysis of the development of the project.

- 6 When Melnikov arrived in Paris at the end of January 1925, he was faced with the task of realizing his project for the pavilion as well as a small ensemble of kiosks for Gostorg, the state trade organization, in a very short time. He was assisted by Berthold Lubetkin, who was charged with "interpreting" Melnikov's drawings and acting as a Russian-French interpreter, and Volodko. Melnikov also met with Aleksandra Ekster and Boris Gladkov, both of whom were charged with assisting in the construction and design of the Soviet contribution to the exposition. Much of the most important work in the elaboration of the working drawings for the pavilion and Gostorg kiosks was undertaken by Les Charpentiers de Paris, the French design and construction cooperative. In his analysis of the relationship of the working drawings to the project Melnikov submitted to the exposition committee in early January, Garrido clarifies the course work on the project, which has confounded some historians. Through a close reading of the drawings, Garrido convincingly shows that Melnikov did not collaborate with Les Charpentiers de Paris in the elaboration of the final project, but rather charged Les Charpentiers de Paris with producing detailed drawings for a definitive solution.<sup>3</sup> Garrido's perceptive and careful analysis of the graphic records of Melnikov's pavilion on this point and others is a valuable contribution to our understanding of his work.
- 7 While the aim of the pavilion was to familiarize the international public with the production of the young Soviet state, its construction offered Melnikov a first opportunity to engage with the Parisian architectural scene. We get a sense of Melnikov's place in this milieu through the letters and accounts left by Rodchenko. He too had travelled to Paris, in March 1925, to contribute to the Soviet section. He was responsible for painting the pavilion bright red, installing a model workers' club in the Palais de Bois, and installing several sections in the Grand Palais. As Christina Kiaer has shown, Rodchenko's trip to Paris was accompanied by a complex and self-conscious struggle to reconcile his avant-garde, socialist views with the self-evident allure of the spectacle of Paris.<sup>4</sup> Melnikov figured in this process of reconciliation in the form of a caricature drawn by Rodchenko in 1925. It shows a flattened view of the pavilion with a small figure inviting visitors to enter. This diminutive figure is none other than Melnikov, dressed as a dandy. The contrast between this prototypical bourgeois figure and Rodchenko's self-presentation as an art-worker, notably in Mikhail Kaufman's photographic portrait of 1922, could not be more striking.
- 8 The image of Melnikov as dandy reappears in a photograph taken at the vacation house of Robert Mallet-Stevens in Ciboure in 1925. Melnikov had insisted that his wife and

two children be allowed to travel from Moscow to Paris for a family holiday. Having completed his work in Paris in June, Melnikov left for Chartres, where he visited the cathedral, and to Lyon, having received an invitation from Tony Garnier. Mallet-Stevens, with whom Melnikov had become friendly while building the pavilion, invited Melnikov and his wife to his house in the Southwest of France. This holiday was important not only as a singular event in Melnikov's life, but also because it was here that he began work on two distinct projects for automobile garages, each with a capacity of 1,000 automobiles. Garrido shows that these enigmatic projects were not commissions from the municipality of Paris, as some have surmised, but rather speculations on the form of this new building type. They are particularly important because they establish direct links between Melnikov's experience in Paris and his success after he returned to Moscow, where he would design two garages for city buses.

- 9 The Soviet Pavilion of 1925 survived long after Melnikov's departure and the end of the exposition. It was given to the Workers' Syndicate of Paris, which moved it to the Avenue Mathurin-Moreau, on the site where the headquarters of the French Communist Party stands today. Melnikov's building served as a reading room and classroom for the Workers University of Paris until 1939. Garrido makes clear that the building also survived as an important point of reference for Melnikov in later years, and as a quasi-mythological structure in the historiography of modernism. Due to this status, several attempts have been made to reconstruct Melnikov's pavilion since the 1980s, none of which has come to fruition. Garrido is thankful that none of these reconstructions have been executed, because he firmly believes that it was a work deeply embedded within its time and place. This is evident from the analytical precision Garrido brings to his subject. This was no easy task given the current state of Melnikov's archive, which remains virtually inaccessible to scholars while the status of the Melnikov family estate remains unclear. Under these conditions, the excavation of new primary material is not possible. Garrido's great contribution with *Melnikov en París* is to synthesize a broad range of sources and subject them to rigorous analysis. The picture of Melnikov that emerges from Garrido's work is nuanced and contradictory. Most importantly, he shows us how Melnikov struggled to reconcile his ardent individualism with his constant engagement with the forms and solutions offered by the architectural and artistic milieu in which he worked.

---

## NOTES

1. A.A. Strigalev, I.V. Kokkinaki, eds., Konstantin Stepanovich Mel'nikov : arkhitektura moei zhizni, tvorcheskaia kontsepsiia : tvorcheskaia praktika (M. : "Iskusstvo", 1985), 171.
2. See S. Frederick Starr, *Melnikov : Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1978) ; Idem, *Il padiglione di Melnikov a Parigi* (Rome : Officina Edizioni, 1979) ; S. Frederick Starr, Jean-Louis Cohen, K. Mel'nikov, *le pavillon soviétique, Paris 1925* (Paris : L'Equerre, 1981).
3. Garrido is principally concerned with clarifying the accounts of the design of the pavilion offered by Catherine Cooke, Starr, and Cohen. It should be noted that Cohen was among the first

publish the drawings created by Les Charpentiers de Paris. See Jean-Louis Cohen, “Il padiglione di Melnikov a Parigi : una seconda ricostruzione,” *Casabella* 50, 529 (1986) : 40-51.

4. See Christina Kiaer, *Imagine no Possessions : The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2005).

---

## AUTHORS

**RICHARD ANDERSON**

University of Edinburgh